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Research Article

Empowering tomorrow's educators: Critical literacy journeys of pre-service English teachers

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The current longitudinal qualitative research explored the development of pre-service English teachers' perspectives on critical literacy and critical pedagogy throughout the Critical Reading and Writing course. The data were collected through a text selection questionnaire, pre-course and post-course critical consciousness questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews. At the beginning, a text selection questionnaire was administered to identify social issues relevant to the target teacher candidates' lives. Based on the results obtained from the text selection questionnaire, the texts which are about women, virtual education, censorship and future anxiety were chosen to be used in the course. The critical consciousness questionnaires assessed shifts in understanding and attitudes toward critical literacy and pedagogy over the course and semi-structured interviews provided in-depth insights into the pre-service English teachers' perspectives and experiences. The data were analyzed using content analysis to interpret the qualitative findings. The findings indicate a notable change in the students' perspectives toward integrating social issues into English teaching. They developed more positive attitudes toward a more critical language education approach including social issues and empowering learners to be the agents of change. The participants also demonstrated improved understanding of critical pedagogy, and recognition of the transformative role of English teachers. According to the results, it is likely that these pre-service teachers will be able to integrate critical literacy activities and social awareness into their future teaching practices.

Keywords: Critical literacy; Critical pedagogy; Teacher education

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1. Introduction

The rapid changes in every aspect of our lives, caused by globalization, technological developments, and diverse digital communication tools, have necessitated a shift in the skills required to thrive in the 21st century. In this regard, scholars suggested that literacy skills one needs extend far beyond basic reading and writing skills since today's young individuals are exposed to a vast array of information from diverse sources across social, cultural, and academic domains (Leland, et al., 2005; Unsworth, 2001). It is no longer adequate for learners to simply read and absorb information; they must also learn to critically examine and analyze the content they encounter. Therefore, critical literacy instruction is necessary to address this need. The critical literacy instructional approach involves adopting a critical stance toward information, questioning

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its validity, and delving deeper to reveal hidden biases or assumptions. As Shor (1999) emphasized, critical literacy involves people's use of language to challenge the socially constructed aspects of their self, and when people are critically literate, they explore their continuous growth to uncover the personal perspectives that enable them to understand the world and engage with it. Therefore, critical literacy is defined as the process of learning to read and write while becoming aware of one's experiences as historically shaped within particular power structures, and what is aimed through the integration of critical literacy into education is to question these unequal power dynamics in society (Anderson & Irvine, 1993).

To apply critical literacy in language classes effectively, texts are crucial as they serve as the main materials for learners to analyze and engage with. In parallel to the goals of critical literacy, Vasquez (2014a) suggests that the texts should include current topics and problems that learners find relevant to speak and write about, so curriculum design is of utmost importance while putting critical literacy into practice. The curriculum ought to be critical, making both teachers and learners actively explore issues about social justice and equity. When reading critically, learners do not passively accept the content of texts as they are presented; instead, they acknowledge that texts are subjective representations based on authors' decisions in content and how to present it (Janks, 2009). That is, as Wallace (2003) argues, a process of meaning-making and critique is initiated by readers with the need to respond to texts, and this enhances their critical thinking skills (Soares & Wood, 2010).

Despite growing recognition of the importance of critical pedagogy and critical literacy, longitudinal studies that integrate both theoretical and practical applications are not adequate. This study contributes to the literature by providing detailed insights into the impact of critical literacy practices, such as writing critical response papers and participating in critical discussions, on pre-service English teachers' perceptions. Moreover, this study attempts to show how engagement with critical literacy and pedagogy shapes future educators' teacher identity.

In this longitudinal qualitative research, the development of pre-service English teachers' perspectives on critical literacy together with critical pedagogy was investigated throughout the Critical Reading and Writing course. To meet the requirements of the course objectives set by the course instructor, ELT students engaged in various activities, including writing critical response papers to the selected texts about social issues and participating in text-based discussions aimed at developing their critical literacy skills. By comparing the students' responses before and after the course, this study aims to reveal the impact of critical literacy practices on the students' perceptions and understanding. Additionally, interviews were conducted with a specific group of pre-service teachers from diverse backgrounds to provide a more in-depth analysis of their perspectives. Therefore, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ 1) How do pre-service English teachers' perspectives on critical literacy and critical pedagogy develop throughout the Critical Reading and Writing course?

RQ 2) What perspectives do pre-service English teachers have on writing critical response papers and participating in text-based discussions about social issues?

2. Literature Review

Critical literacy acts as a guiding force through the complexities of the content and ideas that are presented to readers by shedding light toward better comprehension and uncovering hidden messages buried in texts. It is considered more to be a social and political ability (Siegel & Fernandez, 2000), and it includes an explicit political approach to learning and teaching (Luke, 2012). Accordingly, education should foster social justice, respect, and unity by encouraging students to take on active roles in shaping society (Janks, 2013). In this context, language extends beyond a simple list of words; it incorporates both verbal expressions and actions; therefore, the cognitive dimension of literacy should consider how individuals connect to and engage with their surroundings (Freire, 2000). When practicing critical literacy through a variety of texts, readers are expected to explore social structures with their inequalities and power dynamics (Gieve, 1998).

Readers undergo the process of examining, critiquing, and reconstructing the norms, rule systems, and practices shaping everyday social contexts (Luke, 2004). That is, embracing critical literacy enables individuals to question the status quo, advocate for change, and contribute to a just society.

When the goals of critical literacy are examined, it becomes apparent that critical pedagogy, critical reading, and critical thinking are interconnected concepts that influence each other. As Akbari (2008) explains with Pennycook's (2001) terminology, critical pedagogy entails teaching with an attitude, and it focuses on empowering learners to initiate social change (McLaren, 2015). Brazilian educator Freire, who is recognized as the originator of critical pedagogy, defines it as the pedagogy of the oppressed, focusing on empowering individuals who are marginalized, excluded, and disadvantaged. The concept of praxis, which is central to Freire's ideas of critical literacy, is put into practice when learners take part in both reflection and action (Jeyaraj & Harland, 2014), and such an approach allows learners to actively engage with their environment and reflect on it to bring about change (Mayo, 2004). Within this context, critical thinking is not regarded simply as a theoretical cognitive ability but as an active social engagement (Gieve, 1998). As for the relationship between critical reading and critical literacy, there exists an overlap between the two despite their distinctions (Wells et al., 2022). Both stress that readers play an active role in constructing meaning rather than passively receiving it, thereby highlighting the significance of text critique. However, critical literacy attaches more importance to addressing power dynamics and promoting social justice by allowing readers to participate in discussions and tasks about the relevant topics concerning inequalities and injustices (Cervetti et al., 2001). While critical reading delves into grasping the viewpoint of individual authors at the micro level, critical literacy prioritizes the examination of power dynamics and inequalities on a broader level (Wells et al., 2022).

Critical literacy does not necessarily require readers to adopt a negative viewpoint; rather, it entails exploring issues from diverse perspectives, evaluating them, and proposing feasible paths for enhancement (Vasquez, 2010, 2014a). To implement a curriculum that centers on critical literacy, using texts dealing with social issues has greater capacity in that it enables both teachers and learners to shift from reading passively to reading critically by allowing them to contemplate topics, such as justice, fairness, and inequality and to inquire into the reasons why certain groups are marginalized compared to others (Lewison et al., 2000). Although texts on social issues are emphasized as the primary resources for critical literacy practices, all texts may carry bias in the underlying meanings to some level; thus, any issues, topics, or even everyday items that readers find interesting and relevant to their lives can be viewed as texts and analyzed from a critical literacy standpoint (Janks, 2014; Vasquez, 2014b; Vasquez et al., 2019). As seen in Janks's (2014) study, even bottled water can function as a text when it is utilized appropriately to connect learners' personal experiences to local and broader global contexts. In this sense, it might be contended that teachers have a crucial role because they are the ones who facilitate meaningful connections between students' lives and the world around them to guide them on their journey toward critical literacy.

To implement critical literacy effectively in language classes, a pragmatic framework based on four dimensions of critical literacy has been proposed by Lewison, et al., (2002). In the first dimension, which is "disrupting the commonplace", commonly held beliefs, norms, or assumptions are problematized. Readers start to question what is embedded in texts and how texts try to position them. That is, this dimension helps readers "read against the grain" (Van Sluys, 2005, p. 21). The second dimension centers on "interrogating multiple viewpoints," and in this, the significance of examining issues from different perspectives is highlighted. As for the third dimension, where the focus is on "sociopolitical issues", learners critically examine how sociopolitical systems and power dynamics influence their perceptions and actions, and to do so, they must go beyond their personal opinions and link what they read with their own socio-political contexts (Boozer et al., 1999). The final dimension is "taking action and promoting social

justice," and this closely aligns with Freire's (2000) thoughts about literacy. Learners must be engaged in reflection and reaction to the world in order to transform it.

Teaching and learning of a language, whether it is one's native, second, or foreign language, are intricately intertwined with the social, political, economic, and cultural structures that are particular to the settings in which language education occurs. Wallace (1992) argues that the primary objective language learners have while engaging with texts is to enhance their language proficiency; however, the absence of stimulating ideas that may encourage learners to question texts is likely to prevent them from contextualizing reading activities within a social framework. As noted in Balıkçı and Daloğlu's article (2016), texts are mainly considered to be materials facilitating learners' acquisition of new vocabulary and grammar. In ESL and EFL contexts, this heavy focus on language skills has resulted in a lack of philosophical grounding for teacher development, and consequently, language teachers have been constrained from integrating sociopolitical topics into their classrooms (Crookes & Lehner, 1998). Given the global widespread use of English, it becomes imperative to address local issues within our teaching contexts. As language educators, our responsibility must extend beyond focusing solely on linguistic aspects. Instead, we need to incorporate relevant educational, cultural, and political topics from our current environment into classroom instruction (Pennycook, 1990, 1999). Thus, prospective language teachers must engage in critical pedagogy during their training since this enables them to apply it in their future teaching practices. At this point, the guidance provided by teacher educators is highly valuable. As suggested by Santana-Williamson (2000), it is recommended that student teachers participate in ongoing discussions with their peers and instructors without fear of judgment, and they should be empowered through involvement in curriculum development and implementation.

To the researchers' best knowledge, some inspiring studies exist regarding the incorporation of critical components into English courses in the Turkish EFL context where this study took place. For example, Kızılay (2014) conducted an action research to raise the awareness of pre-service English teachers about critical reading. Balbay (2019) examined the perceptions of pre-service freshman English teachers regarding their profession through critical awareness-focused oral discussions in a speaking course within the ELT department. Similarly, Balıkçı and Daloğlu (2016) analyzed audio-visual and written data from advanced writing courses to explore the critical reading discourse among English teacher candidates. In Bilki and Irgin's (2022) research, following explicit instruction in critical thinking within the Critical Reading and Writing course, the impacts of critical reading and writing practices on the critical dispositions of pre-service English teachers were investigated by focusing on the participants' developmental journeys in thinking, reading, and writing. As for a recent study by Bilki (2023), a reading course model involving the introduction of critical global issues into the classroom was proposed within the context of critical pedagogy. Şenbayrak and Ortaçtepe Hart's (2024) research article about social justice dialogues centered on a conversation club aimed to improve EFL learners' communicative skills and critical literacy by discussing topics traditionally considered taboo and explored not only their discursive strategies but also the opportunities and challenges they faced while talking about these topics. While Bilki's (2023) study is a model proposal, the others are empirical research studies that employed various qualitative methodologies. The common key findings across these studies suggest that the students improve their higher-order thinking skills, engage more deeply with social issues, and learn to apply critical consciousness in practical ways when critical approaches are integrated into their training. However this process is likely to include challenges such as language barriers, emotional labor, and varying levels of student engagement.

While the current study shares several common points with the aforementioned studies in terms of its focus on critical components, qualitative methodology, and some key findings, it also offers valuable contributions to the existing body of literature by providing a detailed account of how English teacher candidates practice critical literacy in a classroom guided by critical pedagogy. Firstly, by allowing these prospective English teachers to select the text topics focusing

on social issues, the research promotes a student-centered approach that enhances their engagement and relevance in learning. Secondly, the intensive training and instruction on critical pedagogy and critical literacy provide the teacher candidates with essential skills to analyze the texts deeply, and deconstruct and reconstruct them. Thirdly, through the use of and pre-and post-course critical consciousness questionnaires, the study systematically attempts to assess shifts in the pre-service teachers' understanding of critical literacy and pedagogy, thus it presents empirical evidence of their development. Furthermore, by revealing the pre-service teachers' perceptions of both written and oral critical literacy practices, the research provides several insights into how these practices can be effectively implemented in English language teaching. This has the potential to empower educators to challenge societal inequities and become catalysts for positive change. The study possibly offers pedagogical insights for preparing educators to foster critical thinking and social awareness among their students, with a strong focus on teacher identity.

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

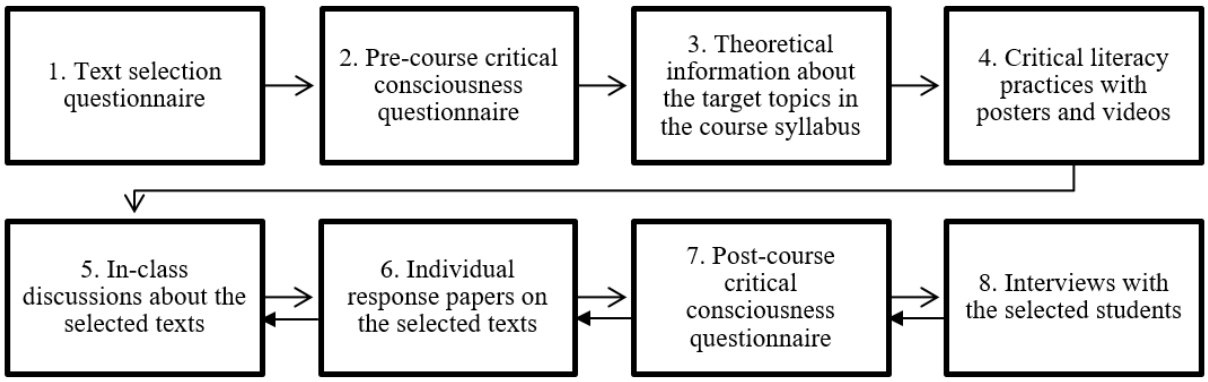
The current research utilized a longitudinal case study design. Yin (2009) asserts that a case study is an empirical investigation that examines a phenomenon within its real-world context; therefore, it serves as a research design to study a social unit. Case studies follow a qualitative approach in which the researcher delves deeply into a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals. These cases are defined by specific time frames and activities, and researchers collect comprehensive data using multiple data collection methods over an extended period of time (Creswell, 2014). Bryman (2012) suggests that case study research typically includes a longitudinal component since the researcher actively takes part in an organization or community for an extended period, and this enables researchers to gather data from participants over time to identify any noticeable changes. The current study aligns with the characteristics of a longitudinal case study design as it aims to have an in-depth exploration of a specific phenomenon within its real-world context, namely the critical literacy practices implemented in the course. As the first author of the study was also the instructor of the course, she was responsible for the design and implementation of the course and actively interacted with the participants during the whole term. Thus, she had the opportunity to observe and analyze changes in their perspectives and understanding of critical literacy. Furthermore, benefiting from a text selection questionnaire, an open-ended critical consciousness questionnaire, and interviews allowed for a thorough examination of the phenomenon from various angles.

3.2. Course Design

The Critical Reading and Writing course was designed by the researchers to implement critical literacy practices in the following manner: Initially, before the start of the semester, a text selection questionnaire was administered. Based on the questionnaire results, social issues relevant to students' lives were identified, and the most frequently mentioned topics were selected as the text topics. During the first five weeks of the semester, theoretical knowledge related to critical pedagogy, critical thinking, critical reading, and critical literacy was provided, and academic articles on these topics were read. Subsequently, some visual materials, including posters and videos were utilized, and their critical analyses were conducted based on the model of four dimensions of critical literacy under the instructor's guidance. Afterwards, the selected texts were employed for detailed critical literacy practices. Besides in-class discussions, the students were also asked to write response papers to each text individually, and feedback sessions were carried out with the students. In these response papers, the students were expected to engage in critical analysis of each text addressing the provided guiding questions, and they were asked to incorporate their thoughts and perspectives by challenging the norms in the texts and linking them to broader socio-political systems. They were also encouraged to reflect on how the texts related to their own experiences and to consider potential action steps based on their analyses.

The steps of the research conducted within the scope of the Critical Reading and Writing course are summarized in the Figure 1.

Figure 1
Research Steps


1. Text selection questionnaire
2. Pre-course critical consciousness questionnaire
3. Theoretical information about the target topics in the course syllabus
4. Critical literacy practices with posters and videos
5. In-class discussions about the selected texts
6. Individual response papers on the selected texts
7. Post-course critical consciousness questionnaire
8. Interviews with the selected students

3.3. Setting and Participants

The study was carried out at the ELT department of a foundation university in Turkey and consisted of two study groups. A convenient sampling method was preferred for the formation of the first study group. In this method, the researcher selects participants who are easily accessible (Muijs, 2012). The researcher, who also served as the instructor of the Critical Reading and Writing course, identified forty-two students (sophomore pre-service English teachers) who attended the course as the first study group. In the formation of the second study group, the maximum variation method, which is a form of purposive sampling, was employed. Purposive sampling allows for in-depth exploration of rich information in accordance with the research objectives by selecting diverse situations. It is preferred when specific cases with certain characteristics or criteria are intended to be investigated (Etikan et al., 2016). One of the purposive sampling strategies, the maximum variation sampling method, ensures maximum diversity among individuals included in the research by forming a small sample (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Accordingly, as for the second study group, six individuals from the first study group were selected based on their demographic differences and educational background. Information regarding the second study group is provided in Table 1.

Table 1
The demographics of the selected participants for the second study group

	Age	*Gender*	*Educational background*	*Similar course experience*
P5	38	Female	French Language and Literature (B.A completed) English Language Teaching (B.A. in progress)	No
P12	19	Male	English Language Teaching (B.A. in progress)	No
P15	22	Female	English Language Teaching (B.A. in progress)	Yes- Critical and Analytical Thinking (Turkish)
P25	21	Male	English Language Teaching (B.A. in progress)	No
P31	19	Female	English Language Teaching (B.A. in progress)	No
P41	33	Male	Civil Engineering (B.S. completed) English Language Teaching (B.A. in progress)	No

3.4. Data Collection Instruments

The data were obtained from three sources: a text selection questionnaire, pre- and post-course critical consciousness questionnaire, and semi-structured interviews.

3.4.1. Text selection questionnaire

The study was structured around a critical pedagogy approach, and it was ensured that the selected reading materials were pertinent to the real lives and societal challenges faced by pre-service English teachers. As emphasized by Hedgcock and Ferris (2018), teachers should familiarize themselves with the characteristics of their students and actively investigate their interests while choosing texts for their courses. Thus, it is essential for reading materials in a critical literacy classroom to relate to students' experiences so that they foster a sense of responsibility for engaging critically with these social issues (Freire, 2000; Shor, 1992). In this regard, to identify topics that are of interest to pre-service English teachers and design critical literacy activities around these topics, the researchers prepared an open-ended questionnaire. The participants were asked what kind of problems they experience regarding society and their own lives, who is most discriminated against in society, and what critical issues should be integrated into language courses to raise awareness and find solutions. This questionnaire was administered online before the start of the term, and thirty-seven of the research participants responded.

3.4.2. Pre and post-course critical consciousness questionnaire

Based on the critical literacy and critical pedagogy literature (Akbari, 2008; Baynham 2006; Freire, 2000; Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Lewison et al., 2000; Pennycook, 1999), the researchers prepared an open-ended instrument titled the Critical Consciousness Questionnaire consisting of three questions:

a. As a prospective English teacher, what do you think about bringing topics like issues of gender, equity, inequality, social justice, and immigration into your English classes and shaping your curriculum around these topics? Explain in detail. Give your reasons.

b. "Education is a political activity in which certain groups of people are discriminated against and their values and rights are ignored. In the critical pedagogy approach, discriminatory roots of education are uncovered, and social change is promoted by ensuring greater inclusion and representation of marginalized groups." What do you think about this statement?

c. "Empowering learners to think out of the box, critical literacy encourages them to challenge existing norms, to question underlying assumptions in texts and to go beyond becoming passive consumers of information." According to this definition, what does critical literacy mean? What can be done to improve learners' critical literacy skills?

The draft questionnaire was initially presented to an instructor who has been conducting similar courses for a long time and based on the feedback received, the questionnaire was finalized. Then, it was administered to forty-two pre-service English teachers taking the Critical Reading and Writing course both at the beginning and at the end of the term. The researchers aimed to assess any changes in the participants' critical consciousness and their understanding of the target concepts over time by administering the same questionnaire twice to the same participants.

3.4.3. Semi-structured interviews

To gather more in-depth insights into pre-service English teachers' perspectives, experiences, and attitudes toward critical literacy, semi-structured interviews were carried out with the selected six participants of the study group. These interviews provided an opportunity to explore each participant's perceptions individually, and reveal the factors that may have affected their engagement with the critical literacy practices implemented in the class and how they may reflect the learning outcomes gained from this course to their teaching careers in the future. Each interview was conducted online and lasted approximately twenty minutes. By examining both

questionnaires and interviews, the researchers aimed to triangulate the data to enrich the overall understanding of the research topic under investigation.

3.5. Data Analysis

The data obtained through the text selection questionnaire, the critical consciousness questionnaires administered at the beginning and end of the semester, and the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using content analysis. The process of summarizing and reporting the primary content and message conveyed by textual data is called content analysis (Cohen et al., 2007). The purpose of content analysis is to interpret the observed and described phenomenon. Through content analysis, it is possible to uncover hidden, implicit content rather than just visible and overt content (Bilgin, 2014).

In the analysis process of the data obtained from the interviews, the data were first transcribed and presented to the participants for their validation, taking their final form before analysis. In order to increase the internal validity (credibility) of the research findings, techniques suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985), such as persistent observation, prolonged engagement, and triangulation, were utilized. One of the researchers maintained prolonged engagement and persistent observation by being present with the study group throughout the 14-week semester as the course instructor. In addition to the forms administered at the beginning and end of the semester, interviews were conducted to diversify the sources of data.

To ensure the consistency of the findings, the coding process conducted by the researchers was repeated by an experienced qualitative researcher. For the reliability of the interview data analysis, the inter-rater agreement (reliability) formula developed by Miles and Huberman (1994) was used [Reliability = Number of agreements / (Total agreements + Number of disagreements)]. As a result of applying the formula, the agreement value was found to be 0.82.

4. Results

Content analysis was utilized to analyze the questionnaires and semi-structured interviews in order to systematically examine and interpret the qualitative data collected from the participants. Accordingly, recurring themes, ideas, and opinions expressed by the participants regarding research questions were identified. Below, the findings obtained from the data analysis are presented.

4.1. Findings of the Text Selection Questionnaire

Thirty-seven students responded to the text selection questionnaire. The participants indicated the societal problems they experience as students and the topics they would like to read and discuss in class. Based on the analysis, it was found that the most recurring and frequently expressed topics were online education, gender roles, lack of freedom of expression, and university students' problems. Most students also mentioned that the Critical Reading and Writing course should raise their awareness about social issues. In light of these results, the researchers found authentic written and visual materials in English from media sources related to these topics. They integrated these materials into the course for critical literacy practices. During the term in-class discussions and writing tasks (response papers) were designed by using these selected texts.

4.2. Results of the Pre-course Critical Consciousness Questionnaire

Four out of 42 students (9.5%) answering the questionnaire expressed their disagreement with integrating topics such as gender issues, racial equity, economic inequality, social justice, and immigration into their English classes. The students argued that it is not their responsibility to address societal issues in the classroom and preferred to concentrate solely on academic content. Additionally, they raised concerns about potentially offending their students owing to the controversial nature of these topics. Out of 42, six of them (14.3%) stated that they partially agreed with the incorporation of these topics. They emphasized the need for caution due to the sensitive nature of these topics and mentioned that classroom activities, including these controversial topics,

should be age-appropriate and handled with care. That is, while they acknowledged the importance of addressing these issues, they supported a more cautious approach. The remaining 32 (76.2%) students indicated their support for integrating these topics into the classroom. They noted both the global and local relevance of these issues and underscored that education must prepare students for real-life challenges. They believed that raising awareness among students could empower them to take action and develop a deeper understanding of individual and sociological differences. They felt that teachers bear the responsibility of guiding students on addressing societal issues as they spend a considerable amount of time with students. They also highlighted that the inclusion of these topics in curricula has the potential to make teachers and students gain new perspectives and enable them to understand the world dynamics. The following quotes from the participants' responses point to these findings:

> All these topics affect the whole world, and of course, we have to discuss them and give information about them. (P2)
>
> These are some actual problems of our world today. They are, unfortunately, a part of our lives. They are not going anywhere if we ignore them. Education is supposed to prepare learners for real life. (P3)
>
> It would be great for students. Being more aware of what is happening around themselves, having opinions about them and being able to take actions are important to keep up with the society's daily issues (P11).

In the second question, the students were asked their opinions about a critical pedagogy statement suggesting that education is a political activity that often leads to the neglect of certain groups' rights and for social change, these discriminatory roots of education need to be uncovered through increased inclusion and representation of marginalized groups. Six students (14.3%) responding to the questionnaire did not answer this question, and one of them explicitly stated that he could not understand the statement. The rest of the students (85.7%) indicated their agreement with this statement. Upon analyzing the students' responses, it was found that they predominantly mentioned disabilities and the differences regarding religion, race, gender, and income as the sources of discrimination. However, the students' explanations were limited, often consisting of no more than two or three sentences. Equality of opportunity emerged as the most prevalent theme since 26 students (62%) voiced the view that education is an inherent human right and should be accessible to all individuals. 11 students (26%) advocated for taking action and raising awareness as solutions, and suggested some activities such as personal narratives of marginalized people and bringing social issues into classes to foster empathy. While 11 students highlighted the necessity of taking action, only three of them specifically referred to the role of English teachers in this regard. They noted that English teachers are not constrained by topic limits as what they teach may be interconnected with real-life topics; therefore, they argued that teaching social problems and exploring potential solutions could serve as valuable content within the curriculum. The quote taken from a student's response addresses this:

> As a future English teacher, I know that I can talk about every part of life with my students. For example, a maths teacher cannot talk about anything besides maths. But our topics are part of our lives, so we can teach social problems, and our students can think about solutions. (P22)

As the last question, a definition of critical literacy was given, and the students were asked what critical literacy meant based on this definition and what could be done to improve learners' critical literacy skills. The findings demonstrated that all of the students tried to rephrase the given term with their own words, and several key themes emerged. One of the most recurring themes was the recognition that critical literacy involves both deep and free thinking. The students stated that critical literacy entails the comprehension of a text beyond the surface level by delving into the underlying meanings embedded within a text. In addition, a lot of students articulated the necessity of questioning stereotypes, norms, and dogmas and highlighted that critical literacy is likely to serve this purpose. 18 students (42.8%) did not provide any suggestions on how to improve learners' critical literacy skills. The students who provided suggestions pointed out the

need for more reading and discussion activities involving controversial and popular real-life topics in English classes. The following quotes exemplify the most recurring viewpoints of the students in relation to critical literacy:

> Questioning the text, not believing something without questioning. (P11)
>
> Critical literacy makes learners understand what message is given behind a text. (P28)
>
> What is the author's real purpose while writing this text? (P30)
>
> To improve critical literacy skill, students can read lots of controversial texts from different writers on the same topics. They can criticize and compare them. (P36)

All in all, we can infer from these findings that the students tended to answer the first question based more on their observations and experiences. For the second question about critical pedagogy, they provided relatively limited responses compared to other questions, with some students not answering it at all. The reason for this might be the students' unfamiliarity with certain words in the statement and abstract concepts. Regarding the third question, they attempted to rephrase the definition of critical literacy; however, several students did not offer any suggestions on how to develop this skill.

4.3. Results of the Post-course Critical Consciousness Questionnaire

The same questionnaire was administered to the same forty-two students at the end of the term, and several significant findings were obtained. The most notable result different from the preliminary findings, is that 41 students (97.6%) responded positively to the inclusion of topics such as gender issues, inequality, social justice, and immigration in their future English teaching classes. No students disagreed; however, only one student partially agreed by stating that English teachers' primary task is to teach the target language, but they can include these topics as discussion points without necessarily being responsible for finding solutions. 17 students (40.4%) suggested that incorporating such topics into the curriculum would contribute to the enhancement of learners' critical thinking skills. This aspect had been mentioned by only a few students in the pre-course questionnaire. Consistent with the pre-course questionnaire results, but with a higher frequency, the students supporting the integration of these topics into English classes emphasized their relevance to real-life issues and the local context. They also noted that a curriculum shaped around the things learners encounter in their lives could enhance awareness of their surroundings and be advantageous for them to acquire multiple perspectives. 15 students (35.7%) who responded to the questionnaire specifically mentioned the role of language education and English teachers in integrating real-life topics into teaching. They highlighted that teaching English naturally accommodates such topics because their relevance and authenticity motivate learners, leading to a more meaningful and engaging language learning experience. This differs from the initial results where only a limited number of students had discussed this particular point. Below are some quotes from the post-course findings addressing this:

> Bringing these topics into classes makes learning more interesting. English curricula are only about undebatable topics like food, traveling, etc. and this might make learning English boring. (P28)
>
> English classes are richer than other classes. It is not maths. You can bring any material to the class if it has proper language and images. Teaching English is not only about teaching the language. You also teach the culture, ideas, and different perspectives to your students. (P40)

Post-course questionnaire results revealed a significant improvement in the students' comprehension of the critical pedagogy approach. While six participants in the initial questionnaire failed to respond to the statement, all students who participated in the post-course questionnaire addressed it; thus, this finding might be considered a marked improvement in their grasp of the concept. Responses varied, with some offering contextual examples from their local environments, while others employed related terminologies to explain their familiarity with this approach. Only three students provided insufficient explanations regarding this question. The comparison between pre-course and post-course results showed that many of the explanations given in the initial one were repeated in the post-course responses with more details. For instance,

the statements advocating for inclusivity, such as "education is for everyone," "all people deserve representation," and "discrimination is unacceptable" were prominently restated by more than 80% of the students. Another significant result obtained from the post-course questionnaire was that more than half of the students (52.4%) expressed their opinions on the statement concerning critical pedagogy by employing specific vocabulary linked with this approach, as found in the pertinent literature. To be more specific, they utilized "multiple perspectives," "challenge and reconstruct structures," "oppressors and oppressed," "taking action," "problem posing education," and "challenge the norms" to clarify their thoughts about critical pedagogy in their responses.

> Critical pedagogy encourages students to challenge and change social issues. Students should be aware of their society's problems, and they should come up with solutions. (P18)

Furthermore, unlike only three students who referenced the role of teachers in the pre-course questionnaire, 12 students mentioned the transformative roles of English teachers while explaining the critical pedagogy statement in the post-course questionnaire. They linked their responses to the first question of the questionnaire about integrating social issues into English classes, and they suggested that English teachers could implement the critical pedagogy approach by integrating such topics into the curriculum, thus making it more relevant to students. P12 and P17 elaborated on their perspectives regarding the critical pedagogy statement, as shown below:

> As a teacher, I will act for social justice and improve my students' critical thinking skills by bringing topics related to socio-political problems and not forcing them to be open-minded. (P12)
>
> We should design our curriculum about real problems.... Students can gain new perspectives about social issues. (P17)

In the pre-course questionnaire, while articulating their views on critical literacy, the students predominantly rephrased the provided statement. Likewise, in the post-course questionnaire, they expounded on the critical literacy statement, but with a notable difference. This time, 38 participants (90.4%) incorporated numerous words, phrases, terms, and concepts from critical literacy literature into their explanations. 10 of them also touched upon the importance of the four dimensions of critical literacy by giving examples. In Table 2, examples are provided to demonstrate that 38 students attempted to utilize various words, phrases, terms, and concepts derived from the relevant literature on critical literacy while expressing their views in the questionnaire. In addition, while 24 students provided suggestions in the former one, the latter questionnaire showed a significant increase, with 33 students (78.5%) offering recommendations on improving learners' critical literacy skills. This considerable increase indicates a heightened level of engagement and awareness among the students in relation to the enhancement of critical literacy skills. In the following, responses from some participants regarding the suggestions are presented:

> We can improve learners' critical literacy skills by giving the learners controversial topics and let them have discussions about them. (P11)
>
> Bringing authentic materials to class, asking critical questions to students, and writing activities about gender and social justice can improve learners' critical literacy skills. (P17)
>
> Gen Z people are not silent, they want their voice to be heard. We must select materials accordingly. For example, we can choose texts about social justice issues instead of choosing some basic things. We have to empower the learners. (P40)

After comparing the pre-course and post-course questionnaire results, several significant findings emerged. First, there was a notable change in the students' perspectives toward integrating social issues into their English teaching classes. Second, their increased engagement with the concept and utilization of related terminologies in the post-course questionnaire responses demonstrated an evident improvement in the students' comprehension of critical pedagogy (see Table 2). Third, the transformative role of English teachers in implementing critical

Table 2
Students' utilization of literature-derived vocabulary in discussing critical literacy

Students	*Vocabularies*	*Students*	*Vocabularies*
P1	study of power relations in texts, four dimensions	P22	-
P2	what is hidden beyond words, four dimensions	P23	going beyond what is accepted
P3	study of power relations in texts	P24	-
P4	study of power relations in texts	P25	reconstructing texts
P5	four dimensions, instructional approach	P26	challenging stereotypes, raising awareness
P6	interpreting the world, real-life problems	P27	considering different perspectives
P7	what the text is trying to tell us	P28	not reading the text in a conventional way
P8	four dimensions	P29	considering diverse perspectives
P9	bringing hot topics to classes	P30	studying power relations, 21st-century skill
P10	proposing solutions	P31	raising awareness
P11	bringing controversial topics	P32	questioning the validity of information
P12	four dimensions- being open-minded	P33	bringing real-life topics to classes
P13	four dimensions	P34	considering multiple perspectives
P14	societal issues	P35	challenging stereotypes
P15	four dimensions, being actors, not spectators	P36	considering multiple viewpoints and questioning the written text
P16	recognizing the dominant ideas	P37	taking action, transforming society
P17	authentic materials	P38	bringing real-life topics to classes
P18	four dimensions, study of power relations in texts	P39	21st-century skill, questioning the validity of information
P19	four dimensions, readers as active participants	P40	coming up with solutions
P20	four dimensions, breaking the conventional	P41	criticize the whole world, not just the text, problems related to real-life
P21	-	P42	-

pedagogy was highlighted by a larger number of students in the post-course questionnaire. Furthermore, the substantial increase in the number of students offering recommendations to improve learners' critical literacy skills suggests an increased level of awareness and commitment to enhancing critical literacy. To sum up, the findings obtained from the post-course questionnaire reveal that the students developed more positive attitudes toward a language education approach that is more inclusive, raises social awareness, and enables them to be critically engaged.

4.4. Interview Findings

The interview transcriptions were analyzed and categorized by identifying significant statements, terms, repetitions, and specific keywords. From the findings, four main themes emerged regarding the target prospective English teachers' perceptions of critical literacy practices.

4.4.1. Engagement with social issues

All participants demonstrated engagement with social issues covered in the course, such as feminism, censorship, equality, racism, and gender roles. As these topics were selected according to the text selection questionnaire, they held personal relevance for each participant; thus they expressed a strong connection to these real-life issues. They appreciated the opportunity to explore and reflect on these topics by associating them with their own experiences and observations. It was uttered by some participants that critical literacy practices had a meaningful impact since they led to shifts in their attitudes and perspectives as they started to consider viewpoints they may not have previously encountered. In this regard, P5 said that:

> ...engaging in discussions with my peers allowed me to analyze censorship from multiple perspectives. We once watched an advertisement and discussed the gender roles portrayed in it, and we discussed the underlying meanings of the ad. Additionally, we examined a poster related to the coronavirus. There was also an advertisement about motherhood. I participated more actively in discussions related to topics I was more interested in. (P5)

The participant pre-service English teachers acknowledged the importance of critical literacy practices that involve analyzing texts, questioning societal norms, and responding. Most of them said that they were able to put the four dimensions of critical literacy into practice through oral and writing tasks. Moreover, engagement with these social issues extended beyond the boundaries of the classroom since the participants continued to reflect on and discuss these topics in their personal lives and interactions with classmates outside of formal class settings.

4.4.2. Comfort level and challenges during critical literacy practices

The participants' experiences in the class discussions about social issues varied. Some expressed comfort, while others indicated discomfort or pressure due to the fear of being ridiculed, societal pressures, and linguistic barriers caused by the use of English.

> I didn't feel very comfortable discussing controversial topics like feminism, censorship, and gender roles in class. While we were talking about women's rights, I felt a bit of pressure in the classroom. I wondered if my words would be mocked. There's a possibility of that. In my opinion, both globally and in Turkey, there isn't enough respect for women's rights, and I believe that women face a lot of bullying in schools. (P15)

Despite the initial challenges like language proficiency and fear of judgment, they overcame these obstacles through adaptation and class practices. It was voiced that when the course instructor used Turkish while explaining tasks, and provided examples from Turkish culture, it helped relax the students. For example:

> I felt quite comfortable talking about social issues. I didn't feel like I was being judged. There was a nice discussion environment with both those who agreed and disagreed with the ideas. (P41)

The participants also praised the use of digital tools like Padlet as they did not have to write names on Padlet; they could freely express their ideas, and other students could see those ideas; therefore, they stated that using such digital platforms fostered collaborative analysis and helped

them value multiple perspectives. The students also emphasized that the course instructor facilitated the tasks without imposing any ideas. They appreciated her selecting authentic materials and promoting respectful dialogue among students to create a supportive atmosphere; therefore, the learners felt empowered to express themselves and think deeply about social issues.

As for the critical writing tasks, all participants felt more comfortable while expressing themselves through writing tasks rather than verbal discussions. While shaping the content of their response papers, the participants highlighted the significant contribution of information they had read or seen on social media platforms. They found writing response papers on the selected texts to be beneficial for articulating their thoughts and experiences on social issues comprehensively.

4.4.3. English classes as ideal settings

The participants strongly agreed on the importance of integrating social issues into English language teaching. They regarded English classes as ideal settings for critical literacy practices in that English language education has an interdisciplinary nature, and content selection for materials can be flexible. They thought that English teaching curriculum has the potential to improve learners' critical thinking skills, address societal challenges, raise awareness, and make them think about solutions. The participants advocated for learning experiences that link language education to real-world issues and personal experiences because critical literacy practices facilitated deeper engagement with the target language and provided a sense of achievement and satisfaction by creating opportunities for self-expression in speaking and writing tasks. Employing strategies like using dictionaries, conducting research, and drawing upon personal experiences effectively may contribute to the target language development by overcoming language barriers. The following excerpts point to this theme:

> English lessons are suitable for these topics because if we look at traditional English topics, they often feel artificial. But these topics are from real life. I think students can feel more comfortable if they find topics more relevant. This could also have a positive impact on language development. (P15)

> In English classes, the topics are limitless. It might be a bit difficult to do this in other lessons like math or science, but it's much easier for English teachers. They have many opportunities, but it also carries some risks. My students might misunderstand me. Sometimes they may think we're imposing an ideological idea, or they might get offended. We need to design these activities very carefully. (P31)

These findings suggest that the participants are aware of the affordances and challenges of integrating social issues into English teaching. They noted that while critical literacy offers cognitive and social benefits, activities must be carefully designed to prevent misunderstandings or bias.

4.4.4. Implications for teaching career

The findings showed that the participants acquired numerous valuable insights applicable to their future teaching careers. They emphasized it is possible to provide transformative learning experiences for their students through the implementation of critical literacy practices, which include engaging students in discussions surrounding social issues, exploring texts from diverse perspectives, questioning conventional ideas, linking them to broader socio-political structures, deciphering the underlying messages in media, and collaboratively brainstorming solutions to real-world problems. The excerpts below address this theme:

> Previously, I only considered myself as someone who would deliver the lessons. I didn't think about the social aspect of language or how social issues could contribute to English lessons. I have realized the importance of this and learnt how to select and present them to my students effectively. I learnt to pay attention to various criteria when choosing reading materials or activities. (P15)

> When students set other goals or tasks for themselves, even while learning the language, they become more successful. Engaging with social issues can help them become more socially

> responsible citizens. They learn to think critically, not just accepting everything they're told or they read. Students who think critically become responsible members of society. (P41)

These representative excerpts above indicate that the participants recognized the significant impact of critical literacy practices on their future teaching careers. It can be said that they shifted their view regarding teaching from simply delivering content to creating a more socially responsible learning environment.

One of the participants who currently teaches English to young learners mentioned that she started implementing what she gained from the Critical Reading and Writing course. She stated that in addition to traditional comprehension questions, she tried to ask her students critical questions while reading texts.

> For example, I'm currently teaching English to elementary school children, and I try to ask them analysing questions during readings. I ask questions like, "Do you agree with the author? Are there points where you disagree?" Sometimes the kids ask me, "Why are you asking us these things?" They think differently because they're not used to thinking this way. After taking this course, I tried it a few times, and it caught the children's attention. (P5)

In summary, the findings highlighted the significant impact of critical literacy practices on the participants' perspectives and their engagement with social issues. Their willingness and suggestions regarding critical literacy practices demonstrated that they have the potential to create transformative learning experiences for their students in the future. That is, the pre-service English teachers in this study found the opportunity to reinterpret the world and are likely to reflect this understanding on their future teaching practices with their developing critical literacy skills.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this research was to investigate the impact of critical literacy practices on the development of pre-service English teachers' perceptions and understanding of critical literacy and critical pedagogy. Benefiting from the principles of critical pedagogy, the design of this research aligned with the proposed practices of critical pedagogy in L2 classes by Akbari (2008). Accordingly, relying on one's local culture and integrating real-life concerns into the curriculum allow learners to understand them deeply and find ways to enact positive societal changes; hence, such an approach is likely to empower individuals to become agents of change in their communities. To this end, the topics of the texts employed in the course were identified by a text selection questionnaire, and the texts, including actual issues relevant to the students' lives, were chosen according to the findings. Subsequently, critical literacy tasks were prepared for each text. The course instructor, considering the students' unfamiliarity with these practices, switched to Turkish, the students' native language, during certain tasks to clarify instructions and facilitate communication, as suggested in Akbari's (2008) article, and this was found beneficial by the interviewees.

In line with the instructional model of critical literacy proposed by Lewison et al. (2015), the present study utilized social issues and media as the main resources, and the students were expected to engage in critical social practices by analyzing the texts based on the model of four dimensions of critical literacy described by Lewison et al. (2002). During the course, the students were expected to do critical analyses of the texts and respond to the arguments presented in the texts by providing examples from their own local contexts or by comparing the issues with their own local problems. In Nam's (2020) study, it was found that the students also problematized issues presented in the texts by drawing upon their academic knowledge. On the contrary, this study revealed that the students primarily benefited from their personal experiences and observations when responding to the texts. From this finding, it can be interpreted that the content of the texts and/or the students' background may have influenced the approach they took in critical literacy practices.

The research by Şenbayrak and Ortaçtepe Hart (2024) suggests that different opinions should not be seen as a problem but as an opportunity to hear various perspectives on a particular issue.

Similarly, considering multiple viewpoints emerged as a significant component of critical literacy skills in the current study. Another finding that emerged from the current research was that media was not solely employed as a resource by the course instructor for critical literacy practices, but also the students actively utilized it to generate their content in discussions and response papers. The interviewees stated that they drew extensively upon their readings and observations on social media to construct their arguments. However, considering the information overload and misinformation in digital platforms, they need to approach this information more consciously. Therefore, it may be beneficial to include critical media literacy as part of critical literacy instruction.

The findings of Huh's (2016) research on the instructional model of critical literacy revealed that the students demonstrated a strong sense of identity as active participants when they engaged with the topics they were familiar with. In the same research, it was also suggested to have students choose the topics for critical literacy activities. In these aspects, Huh's (2016) research corroborates the design and the results of the present study. As indicated in the first theme emerging from the interview data, the students demonstrated higher engagement with social issues because the topics of the texts that centered on these issues were decided based on the students' preferences; thus, they were considered relevant.

When comparing the findings of this study with Balıkçı and Daloğlu's study (2016), a notable difference emerged regarding critical engagement demonstrated by the students. Balıkçı and Daloğlu (2016) found that the students had difficulty addressing key critical literacy dimensions especially "disrupting commonplace" and "focusing on socio-political issues." In contrast, the students in the current study were able to evaluate the texts more critically and reflect this in their spoken and written discourse thanks to explicit training on critical literacy dimensions. This development was confirmed not only by the students' own perceptions but also by the course instructor's reviews on their response papers.

In her research, Bilki and Irgin (2022) concluded that when students are exposed to instruction incorporating critical components such as critical pedagogy, they show a shift toward becoming more critical in their reading and writing practices. A more recent study by Bilki (2023) also proved that a course supported by critical pedagogy provides successful evidence for the effective integration of critical thinking in English language teacher education, and through close engagement with selected texts, learners develop their own perspectives on sensitive issues. In a similar vein, the participants of the current study not only enhanced their understanding of critical pedagogy and critical literacy but also were able to reflect their criticality on productive tasks by developing their own positions on social issues. The findings obtained from the pre-and post-course critical consciousness questionnaires confirmed the significant impact of training provided in the Critical Reading and Writing course. For example, in the post-course questionnaire, more students recognized the relationship between incorporating topics, such as equality, immigration, and gender issues into the curriculum and the enhancement of learners' critical thinking skills. Besides learning about the key terms and concepts, the students realized that there could be an alternative English teaching curriculum where social issues can be included for the promotion of social justice, and English teachers can assume transformative roles by enacting critical literacy.

The findings of the study highlighted the importance of integrating social issues into English language teaching to improve critical thinking, address societal challenges, raise awareness, and encourage learners to take action. Indeed, this resonates with the OECD Learning Compass, which lists transformative competencies, "creating new value, reconciling tensions and taking responsibility" as essential to thrive in the world of the 21st century (OECD, 2019, p. 62). Similarly, the United Nations' Target 4.7 underscores transformative education to promote a fair, democratic, and inclusive future by developing specific competencies to manage uncertainty, unequal power relationships, and polarization (Helin, 2021; United Nations, 2015). The participants of the current study noted that English classes, with their interdisciplinary nature and flexible content, are well-suited for critical literacy practices. Engaging in discussions about social issues, exploring diverse

perspectives, and questioning taken-for-granted ideas are considered to be transformative learning experiences, and these practices are highly likely to equip students with the necessary competencies identified by the OECD and the United Nations.

The prospective English teachers taking part in the study contributed to creating the course syllabus based on their preferences for text selection and engaged in various critical literacy activities. The findings revealed the effectiveness of these practices because even the participants who were initially doubtful or negative about including social issues in language education expressed positive attitudes afterwards. The practice of critical pedagogy inherently includes challenges like indoctrination, uncertainty, and risk (Jeyaraj & Harland, 2016). The research studies by Ördem and Yükselir (2017) and Ördem and Ulum (2019) on critical pedagogy found that pre-service English teachers view classroom discussions about socio-political issues as essential to gain broader perspectives in second language education, however instructors often avoid these topics, especially political ones, due to perceived risks. In parallel to this, the interview results indicated that the participants realized the challenges associated with talking about social justice issues, such as societal pressures and the potential for the instructor to impose her ideas. However, thanks to the supportive atmosphere in the classroom that allows for respectful dialogues, the instructor's facilitation of tasks without imposing any ideas, and the inclusion of individual writing tasks, the participants of the present study made significant progress in applying critical pedagogy and critical literacy from theory to into practice.

While even in-service English teachers approach alternative curricula with hesitation, it is noteworthy that pre-service English teachers in this study actively participated in critical literacy practices within a critical pedagogy-supported course. As a result of this experience, the participants were more willing to understand their transformative responsibilities in progressing toward global citizenship and social justice. Their increased understanding as a result of critical literacy tasks will probably have a significant impact on their future teaching careers and allow them to implement more socially conscious teaching practices.

6. Final Remarks

As the first author of this study and the course instructor, I feel it is important to conclude this article with a reflexivity section. This process was not only a critical literacy journey for my students but also for myself. Despite my 11 years of experience as an English instructor, this was the first time I integrated critical literacy practices into a class oriented around critical pedagogy. In this sense, I was also a novice, exploring and implementing these concepts with my students. In fact, many of the insights I gained throughout this course closely mirror the findings obtained from my students. Perhaps most importantly, this research made me realize that, as a teacher, I was not entirely free from certain biases. Before conducting this research, I read a lot of critical literacy studies implemented with young learners around the world. However, I anticipated challenges in introducing these practices even within a university setting, particularly because of the inclusion of controversial and sensitive topics. I thought that I might face resistance from students. Now, I think that Gen-Z students are more mature and open-minded than I initially expected. Moreover, my assumptions were challenged. For example, although one of my students was shy in the oral discussions, she deeply engaged with the texts in the writing tasks. She was the only one who referenced the Istanbul Convention while attempting to connect the text about gender roles with broader socio-political issues. This revealed the depth of criticality students can achieve, even if they appear reserved in class. As a result of the implementation of critical literacy, I can say that my teaching was also transformed.

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